



HINDSIGHT

Duxbury Comes On-Line

By Jody Morgan

Newcomers to Duxbury are quickly introduced to John Alden and Myles Standish as if these Pilgrim fathers were citizens only recently departed. King Caesar's actual name takes longer to learn, but the glory of the shipbuilding era is a matter of such intense town pride that even a casual visitor cannot leave without experiencing its impact. The significance of the Cable, always capitalized in local references, is more elusive.

In 1868, the silence that had replaced the relentless noise pollution of the shipyards was not considered a community asset. Yet precisely because Duxbury no longer had any major shipping traffic to drag anchors across a submerged line, the sheltered harbor made an ideal landing place for a transatlantic cable.

After a decade of repeated failures and financial losses, Cyrus Field had finally succeeded in linking America and Great Britain by a submarine telegraph cable in 1866. The French were eager to have their own source of instantaneous communication with America, and the founder of Reuters News Service, Julius Reuter, wanted affordable access to a transoceanic telegraph.

As soon as the new telegraph company had been granted a 20-year charter by the French government, investors hurried to purchase shares. Disconnected as Duxbury was from the mainstream of world events, the planned French Atlantic Cable was probably not a favorite topic of local conversation.

But Salthouse Beach, known today as Duxbury Beach, had been singled out by the engineers plotting the safest route across the sea as the perfect terminus for the project. Underestimating the Duxbury

voters, they attempted a clandestine purchase of the site.

Imagine today's town meeting discussing the following article from the warrant of September 16, 1868:

To see if the town will sell the

Nevertheless, the town was elated at the prospect of making international headline news once more. As soon as the Atlantic Telegraph Company openly declared its intentions, town meeting

outside the jurisdiction of the United States.

Defying tide and temperature in frock coats, dignitaries descended by boat from Boston on the 23rd of July to lend their hands to the labor of

hauling the heavy shore end of the Cable from Salthouse Beach to Rouse's Hummock, where a building to house the Cable instruments was still under construction.

Somehow the French and Italian ministers managed to arrive a day too late for the landing and several days too early for the festivities, scheduled for July 27. Disgruntled by the hot and dusty trip by rail to Kingston and by coach to Duxbury, over a road characterized by the

Boston Daily Advertiser as "Sahara-like," the two refused to remain in Duxbury.

Details of the Cable celebration are recorded in "The Landing of the French Cable at Duxbury," a book including transcripts of the speeches as well as photographs of the event. Virtually every newspaper account of the day joined the speakers in expressing the belief that the Cable would restore Duxbury to prosperity and international importance.

The secret the Atlantic Telegraph Company had not shared with the citizens of Duxbury was that the operation of the telegraph office and the maintenance of the Cable would provide few jobs. No one needed to come to Duxbury to receive the news from abroad. A telegrapher could send a signal 12,000 miles in a single second.

Although we rejoice today in the technology that allows computer operators to network from the comfort of home, being the first town in the United States to go on-line directly with continental Europe was a grave disappointment to the 19th-century citizens of Duxbury. The Cable did not save Duxbury from economic depression, and the town was forced to reassess the value of freedom from the din of industry.



Dignitaries in frock coats lend a hand in the landing.

Photos Courtesy of the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society Collections

Beach and upland back to the meadow from the south side of Rouse's Hummock, so-called, to the northerly end of Cut Island, and to take such measures in the premises as they may deem expedient for the interest of the town, by the request of G. B. Weston.

With no purchaser or pur-

authorized the sale and granted the company permission to bury the shore end of the Cable under the street running from the Old Cove to the former Duxbury Bank, the building chosen to house the Cable office.

The United States Congress, however, declared the landing illegal without its consent. After a heated debate, Congress adjourned for the summer of 1869, leaving the issue unresolved.

As late as July 14, with the laying of the Cable already completed between Brest, France, and the Island of St. Pierre off the Canadian coast, dispatches were being sent from

Washington indicating that the Cable would have to remain buoyed off Duxbury Beach until Congress reconvened in the fall.

No wonder Duxbury citizens waited until July 16 to plan their celebration of the Cable's arrival! Secretary of State Hamilton Fish had at last approved an act of the Massachusetts Legislature permitting the local Ocean Telegraph Company to connect with the French Cable



Maintaining the Cable required only a small crew.

pose disclosed, the proposed article was summarily "passed over." The desire for secrecy was later explained as a fear of sabotage from the original transatlantic cable company, but the eventual settlement suggests the French company was also looking for a bargain. With \$6 million in capital subscribed in the first 8 days of public offering, the new Atlantic Telegraph Company paid only \$500 for the landing site at Rouse's Hummock.